"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values ith inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the l church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian ul Civilization.*"

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The Resources of the Country Church

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What are the resources of the country church on which it can draw in doing its part in building a wholesome, well rounded rural life and in solving the national and world-wide problems before us? In considering this question we should discuss not only the resources of the open country church but also of those churches in villages and towns that have a farmer constituency. Whether the church is utilizing its resources most effectively is a question to be answered by the church leadership and the communities served.

One of the resources of the country church is its prevalence as an institution. In this statement all churches in village communities of 2,500 or less population as well as open country religious groups are considered. Church leaders estimate that the 1936 census of rural religious bodies falls at least 20 per cent below the actual numbers. The official census records of that year show that there were 128 thousand rural churches in the United States with a total membership of 17 million persons. The number of churches and membership has been decreasing but rural population has also decreased. The number of rural churches has decreased more rapidly than the rural population but this probably is paving the way for better adjustment of the churches to rural needs through lessening of interdenominational competition in local communities.

Since urban churches draw on the rural churches to an appreciable extent for new members, the religious welfare of country people affects them seriously. In 1936 there were recorded 71 thousand urban church organizations with a total membership of over 38 million. These urban churches and members must all be considered a resource for cooperative service if once they become aware of close relationship between the town and the country churches. They will give of their time, resources and their moral support to all wise efforts to build a satisfying rural life.

Data from church statistical sources reveal that in 1934 there were 244,201 rural and urban ministers, or about 80 ministers to each of the 3,075 counties in the United States. The Agricultural Extension Service had 8,149 County and Home Demonstration Agents in 1936, or about three to the county. The churches provide by far the largest number of full-time professional leaders among the agencies serving the adult population in the rural United States. Since the schools are primarily concerned with youth, this is true even in comparison with the schools. One hundred seventy-three thousand churches reported buildings valued at $3,500,000,000 and expended during 1936 $519,000,000.

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The churches have developed a vast system of education that is a potential resource to utilize in acquainting the public, urban as well as rural, with the great problems of national and world-wide welfare now confronting us. Special church school lessons on these problems to be studied by millions of youth as well as adults can be and are being provided. One denomination alone has a monthly circulation of over 250,000 copies of an adult study and discussion guide that outlines such topics as "Spreading Good Will," "My Contribution to Good Will," "Keeping Alive My Own Interest in Good Will," "Growing in Good Will," "The Religions of Democracy," "Global War and Global Church," "The Church and Tomorrow's World," "Christians Local and Universal."

The many summer outing camps for youth and adults have discussion groups on these subjects. Mission study groups of women and men, now organized in many churches, can make rural life, national and world problems the basis for extended discussion. The scope of potential resources of church organizations in full-time professional leadership and in volunteer lay group study, discussion group and action leadership is far greater than is generally recognized. Church members are already doing much not only within the church but in community affairs. What they are potentially able to do is far beyond what they are now doing.

Even though the resources of the country church in organization and professional and lay leadership are very great, its most significant assets are primarily spiritual. The church is directly interested in the welfare of every human being and has a concern for each person from the cradle to the grave. Perhaps no other institution in rural life approaches the church in its universality of concern for human welfare. The school is interested in youth. Although leading educators now recognize that the schools should make provision for the educational needs of all citizens, whether they be in their mother's arms or twiddling their thumbs in grandfather's chair, in practice, the schools are primarily concerned with those of common or high school age. The schools are not universal in their service.

The various farm organizations are concerned principally with adult economic problems.

The State as a whole is as yet primarily a protective agency. Its service functions are on the increase. But even though it should expand its services to include all of the education, health, recreation and other needs of the community the church still retains its interest in these and, in addition, has the whole field of interpreting basic philosophies of life and the relation of human beings to the "Divinity that shapes our ends."

The church has a universal interest, not limited by group, sex, age, state or national boundaries. All humanity is its concern. The universality of church interest results in significant relations of the church to present day rural community organizations. Although much readjustment has taken place because of population shift, the church shows <u>persistence</u> as a characteristic above most other rural organizations. Studies have been made of typical rural communities in many sections of the country by the Department of Agriculture. A few quotations from the reports give evidence as to how the church persists as a rural institution. The first quotation is about Covington County, Mississippi:

"Despite the evident shortcomings, the churches remain as the chief integrating force in most of the neighborhoods. There may be inadequate pastors, meager facilities and equipment, and insufficient financial support, but the loyalties of the members remain undiminished. A slight tendency for village churches to attract some rural attendance because of their more adequate programs and

church leadership understands the work being done by government and other ncies to improve rural conditions and gives its moral support to their efforts, task of making improvements is much easier. The use of this resource of the untry church by the church for community welfare is again becoming recognized and preciated by other agencies.

The changing attitude of the church toward community service is a most portant and increasing resource. The salvation of the individual soul is, of urse, one of the basic objectives. But the possibility of building a Christian mmunity by helping to develop wholesome living conditions, satisfactory group re-tionships and sound community attitudes in harmony with Christian philosophy of otherhood is now generally accepted by church leaders. It is true that even yet e church service is often limited to the weekly worship, calling by the minister church members and holding an annual revival. But the larger task of building ristian communities is now accepted as an integral part of a complete church pro-ram. This acceptance is an important resource.

Many rural ministers are not now trained seminary graduates, nor are they likely to be in the near future. The effort to provide at least a few specially trained rural leaders by a small number of seminaries is a resource that should not e overlooked. Training for the rural ministry is carried on by departments devoted o that work at the Andover Newton Theological School, Bangor Theological Seminary, oston University School of Theology, Candler School of Theology, Drew Theological eminary, Duke University Divinity School, Garrett Biblical Institute, Louisville resbyterian Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt University chool of Religion and Yale University Divinity School, and a limited number of ther institutions. These groups have already made significant contributions to the leadership not only of rural parishes but to the general church leadership that guides district, conference, state or national rural church policies. The number of such institutions and leaders should increase.

The country church has resources outside its own organization. Contacts on a nation-wide scale with other organizations interested in rural welfare, convinces one that there is a universal spirit of interest in the welfare of the country church. This is partly due to the recognition that if it should use its resources to the fullest extent, there would be no agency more powerful for rural improvement than the church. Other rural improvement agencies stand ready to cooperate with the church by supplying educational material, helping to organize educational programs, training leaders, assisting in community meetings and in any other way that would help improve community life.

How can the church use its resources with reference to the problems of improvement of community life, local, national or world-wide? A few suggestions may be made:

Each church should have one or more small groups, each of which devotes a series of meetings each year to the study and informal discussion of one or more of the current local, national or world problems on which an informed public opinion is needed. The Christian wants to be a good citizen. The continuation of the democratic processes depends on the ability of citizens to act intelligently. The church can and is using to some extent its adult educational organization for this purpose. Its extent and effectiveness can be greatly increased. An illustration of the type of local problem many communities have is the tenant, share-cropper and farm labor situation, both in its own neighborhood and on a national scale. Are the foundations of democracy being undermined by the growth of tenancy throughout the United States? Is each community being broken up by an increasing tenant group? These are typical

A quotation about El Cerrito, New Mexico, is added:

"A priest said, 'One of the mistakes of many of the local agencies is to disregard the influence of the church on these people. If we (church and agency) could only work together on local problems, cooperation from the people would be much easier to secure.'"(1)

These descriptions of the church in rural life taken from official reports by impartial students illustrate that the church is accepted by rural people as an institution of vital importance. Studies made by the University of Wisconsin show that many local rural organizations tend to have a life cycle of but a few years. They start with enthusiasm under the stimulus of some organizer and continue for three or four years. Then after lingering on for a few years longer, held together by loyalty to the organization, they tend to disappear. Weak as the church sometimes seems to be, it persists or readjusts itself and continues as a factor in most rural communities.

The renaissance of the rural neighborhood is making the persistence of the church as an institution of increasing importance. The national trend toward school consolidation has taken away from the farm home the red brick school house that at one time shared with the church the service of being a headquarters for neighborhood meetings. In some sections of the country the Grange hall continues as a building available for public meetings. The country church building, still within walking distance of many country homes, has become a new resource for service. There is considerable evidence that the neighborhood and the country church are being again recognized as essential to any well organized rural life. The neighborhood groups gathered under the auspices of the country church can render a real service in helping to maintain good citizenship in the Nation.

One of the most important resources of the country church is the actual and potential lay leadership to be found in every rural neighborhood. The Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture has reports from the States that more than 650,000 lay leaders are actively taking part in neighborhood programs of crop production, scrap drives and other activities incident to the war effort. Doubtless most of these leaders are affiliated with local church activities. Many others could be developed. The resource is there. Whether it is being used by our churches is another question.

The unquestioning belief of many of our church people that it is worth while to render some volunteer service to the community is an abiding resource to the church. Reliability in trying to do one's part in carrying on group activities is characteristic of church lay leaders. A vast group of lay teachers in religious education, who, from Sunday to Sunday, through rain or shine, meet with little groups of children, are doing their best to render service to these little ones. The resource of loyalty based on ethical principles is there. Is it being used effectively by those responsible for organizing the resource of the religious forces of the community?

The basic ethical philosophy of life represented by the church is a resource that puts the church in a strategic position of influence. It stands for a good life for all in a universal brotherhood and the common fatherhood of God. If

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(1) Olen Leonard and C. P. Loomis, "Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community," El Cerrito, New Mexico, November 1941 -- U.S.D.A., B.A.E., Rural Life Studies: p. 54 (processed)

specialized facilities is noted, but this trend is yet too slight to be rated as an integrating factor in community development. That the church is so strongly a neighborhood institution is an unfavorable influence in the development of communities. Residents may look to the community center for medical services, banking, trading, schooling, and recreation but in religious affiliations their interests remain in the neighborhoods."(1)

The second illustration is about Washington and Frederick Counties, Maryland:

"The churches, measured in terms of membership and attendance, attract three to four times as many persons as the social and economic organizations. The communities which are above the norm in participation in social and economic organizations are below the norm in participation in church affairs. Conversely, the communities which are above the norm in adherence to the churches are below the norm in participation in social and economic organizations. In other words, the communities which emphasize social and economic organizations are not the ones which emphasize church matters."(2)

The Maryland study indicates that there is some competition between churches and other organizations. However, the fact remains that the church persists as a rural institution despite competition of other agencies.

The third description is about Irwin, Iowa:

"A man who hasn't been to church for 'over 5 years' expressed the prevailing attitude toward the churches when he declared with emphasis that 'the churches are the most important institutions in Irwin today and have the greatest effect on the locality. Were it not for them, the community would not be a desirable place to live.' Although the majority of the people in the community attend only rarely or never attend, they believe the church should be supported and maintained. Stated in the words of one informant, 'Loss of the churches would be an irreparable blow to the community.' Another said, 'Religious principles are important in governing the welfare of our community. With few exceptions, the people are fair in their dealings with each other.' Said another, 'Christian ethics are important to the community and to the farmers, but they are not as closely followed as they should be; however, this is not particularly worse now than before.'"(3)

A survey in Alabama reveals:

"The church, as we saw in an earlier discussion of the neighborhood, is the agency or institution most frequently found in the rural areas. Sixty-two of the seventy-six white neighborhoods have churches, but only thirty-three have schools. Not only does the church perform its religious functions but it is the channel for social participation as well."(4)

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(1) H. Hoffsomer and H. Pryor, "Neighborhoods and Communities in Covington County, Mississippi," p. 18 (processed)
(2) L. S. Dodson, Douglas Ensminger and R. N. Woodworth, Oct. 1940, "Rural Community Organization in Washington and Frederick Counties, Maryland." University of Maryland, Bulletin 437, p. 162
(3) Edward O. Moe and Carl C. Taylor, "Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community--Irwin, Iowa" Farm Population and Rural Welfare, U.S.D.A. Rural Life Studies: 5 Dec. 1942 (processed) p. 61
(4) Alabama Rural Communities, Alabama College, Bulletin No. 136, p. 57

questions church groups could study and help to solve. There are so many problems on which we are now expected to have an informed opinion that it is difficult to select those of most importance.

These study and discussion groups help to clarify our thinking on public affairs. News, editorials and syndicated columns in the daily papers, news and comments over the radio give us the basis for thinking. But we are not sure that we know our facts or our opinions until we express them to others. The groups give us the chance to exchange our ideas with others.

Thinking about and discussing national problems may not lead to immediate local action. But they are necessary for right expression of opinion through the ballot box and letters and petitions to our Congressmen. Actively taking part in public affairs is a part of being a good citizen and a good Christian. The democratic way of life cannot be maintained without such taking part.

Local community problems often demand more than study. Immediate action is possible. The problem of land tenure can again be used as an illustration. The following could be considered:

1. The minister and the church should have a program designed to bring tenants into the life of the church and the community.

2. In every way possible, plans should be worked out to help tenants to become owner-operators if there seems to be a real chance of reasonable success as owners. A long-time program designed to reduce the percentage of tenancy should be planned.

3. In the meantime the church should work for tenant-owner contracts that will protect the land and conserve the interests of both owner and tenant.

4. The rural church memberships should be urged to take part, as citizens, in the formation of state and national policies designed to preserve the rural family owning and operating the farm on which it lives.

5. The organizational resources of the church both local and national should be used to help worthy families to get established on the land as owners.

Landless families thus helped would become additional resources to the country church and to the country community.

It can render a real service in helping to solve the problems that still prevent rural communities from enjoying the fullest life. The country church may sometimes appear to be weak and of little importance in country life. But a survey of its resources in universality of human service; in wide distribution and persistence as an institution; in its adaptation to the newer recognition of the neighborhood as an organizational unit in rural life; in the number of professional leaders; in its faith in the value of volunteer lay leadership; in its ethical standards of personal life; in the friendly cooperation of other agencies; and in its acceptance of the belief that the Christian Brotherhood can be established in communities as well as in the souls of men will convince the student that no agency is potentially more powerful than the church in the advancement of rural welfare.

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